

Steppingstones Business Reference Library

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Dealing with Difficult Customers

By Russell Sawchuk

Nov 29, 2004, 11:33

If you're in a public contact position, chances are you'll encounter angry customers. If customers are not handled effectively, they may remain angry, refusing to do further business with your organization. They will also make you angry and upset as well!

Resolving a customer's anger helps you feel better about yourself, increases your job satisfaction, makes you look good to your supervisor, and enables your organization to keep customers satisfied and coming back.

Here are the suggested steps to deal effectively with an angry or difficult customer:

1. Identify the angry customer. Learn to read verbal and non-verbal language. There are two types of anger:

a) Aggressive – person expresses feelings immediately. Anger and hostility are obvious. There is often use of sarcasm describing the merchandise or situation, rapid or abrupt speech, or raised voice.

b) Passive – person keeps his/her anger inside, but their body language gives them away. They plan never to return or do business with your organization again.

2. Diffuse the customer's anger. Deal with the customer's feelings. Do it in the following way:

a) Empathize – enter into the feeling and spirit of the person. Put yourself in their "shoes." You need to try to understand what they're saying, from their point of view. To do this you must be a good listener who blocks out distractions. Show them that you're really listening by maintaining eye contact, nodding and saying, "I see", or "I understand how you must feel." As they talk, the anger will dissipate and you'll get more information about the problem or situation.

If the customer is aggressively angry, let their tirade flow uninterrupted until it's exhausted.

If the customer is passively angry, it's better to confront their anger and bring it out into the open by saying something like "I'm sorry you're upset about this. Let's see what we can do about solving the problem."

b) Ask questions – learn as much as you can about the situation before you attempt a solution.

c) Give feedback – restate, in your own words, the feelings you detect behind what the person is saying. For example, you might say, "It sounds like you are in a hurry. Let's take care of this right away." Feedback should be neither judgmental nor critical but should be positive and supportive. Sound sincere because you don't want your customers to feel that you're patronizing them.

d) Summarize the problem – describe in your own words, what you understand the problem to be. Restating the problem lets the customer know you've listened and lets you know that you understood the situation correctly.

3. Deal with the person's problem in the following way:

a) Find out what the person wants

b) Suggest alternatives

c) Share information

d) Agree on a solution

e) Follow up as necessary.

4. Dealing with angry customers on the telephone. Recognizing angry customers on the phone is more difficult than in person because there are no non-verbal clues to catch. The only ones you might be aware of

are the aggressively angry ones. The anger of passive angry customer is revealed through verbal clues – changes in the tone, speed or pitch of their voices. Once you have identified the caller as being upset, follow the steps listed above.

5. Dealing with provoked customers. Sometimes YOU mishandle a situation. You create an angry customer, or make an already angry customer even angrier. You have been extremely busy, under a lot of pressure, or do or say the wrong thing. When that happens, you have two choices:

a) first, you can admit your mistake and apologize

b) if you think the situation is serious enough, you can refer it upward to your supervisor. Whatever you do, don't ignore it!

Abuse

You are there to serve, not be abused! There are some things you are never obligated to take from your customers, the most obvious being profanity or physical abuse!

There is only one way to deal with these situations — directly:

1. Don't react. The customer who resorts to these behaviours is usually looking to provoke a reaction from you. They will use your reaction to justify their behaviour. Maintaining your cool is your best defense. It's hard for the customer to play this game if you refuse to play.

2. Draw the line. Don't bother quoting the rules — they don't care about the rules. Simply make a clear and direct statement of the consequence should they choose to continue their behaviour. For example, "I can't help you as long as you continue to use that kind of language. If you continue, I will hang up!"

3. Follow through. If the response is positive, continue the interaction. If they do not respond, follow through with the consequence. Then seek out support, perhaps from your supervisor. Be prepared to explain what happened.

Be sure your business has a contingency plan for any serious customer problems such as pulling a gun or physical violence. It happens! Ensure all supervisors and staff know what to do.